

Testimony of Mouafac Harb
Middle East Broadcasting Networks
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Committee on International Relations
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Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, I appreciate the opportunity to be here today to talk about Alhurra Television.

From the beginning, we at Alhurra Television and Radio Sawa have considered ourselves a vital component in the war on terror, as we use professional journalism to advance the cause of freedom and democracy. We fight on a battlefield of ideas; our enemies are the biased perceptions that have ruled unchallenged in people's minds since their childhoods. Our battlefield is on the televisions and radios, in the mosques and coffee houses of the Arab world, where we can take on twisted dogma that may seek to kill the innocent and make saints of their murderers. This is a war of words where the United States – until lately – had no voice.

Our weapon is the truth, and our troops are recruited largely from the ranks of people who were born elsewhere but believe in our mission. They do so at enormous personal risk because our people have to operate in the open in a hostile environment.

Everyone we've hired shares our sense of journalistic values. In fact, during the first round of interviews, many of them asked me if Alhurra could really be free if it was funded by the government. My answer, of course, was yes. And if they were astute enough to be concerned about this, they had just passed a major test for getting the job.

For some of my colleagues, joining the staff of Alhurra involved personal sacrifice – moving half a world away from family and friends to work for an organization that some people back home have been taught to believe is their enemy. I work with courageous people. Their continuing work has had an impact on our audience, an impact on Arab institutions and an impact on their own lives. Alhurra has been condemned by extremist clerics, and is under constant assault from Arabic media outlets that are controlled by dictatorships, or by wealthy Arab royals who keep newspapers and broadcast stations as personal toys. All this has taken its toll on our staff and those courageous enough to speak out on our airwaves.

Earlier this year, our correspondent in Basra (Iraq), Abdel Hussein Khazaal was shot to death in his car with his little boy at his side. Five members of our staff have been wounded. One was taken hostage and was released when the kidnappers became convinced we would not cave in to their demands.

Last Friday we broadcast a 1-hour interview with a Syrian opposition leader. Yesterday, he was arrested when he returned to Syria. And right now, a former Kuwaiti official is being investigated in Kuwait for accusations he made last month on Alhurra.

Given the price in lives and treasure, we – like you – ask ourselves constantly how we are doing in fulfilling our long-term goals of promoting freedom and democracy. Our distinct role in seeking to accomplish these goals is to be an example of a free, professional press in the American tradition. This is, in fact, our mandate from Congress. But we cannot be successful unless we reach a significant audience and that audience finds our news to be reliable.

Independent research consistently shows that, on both scores after only 18 months on the air, we are achieving success. Surveys across the Middle East carried out by ACNielsen this year show weekly viewing rates for Alhurra in satellite-equipped households from 7% to 46% with a median score of 28%. These same surveys reveal news reliability scores ranging from 43% to 92% with a median score of 73%.

Some critics assert, “yes, but Alhurra is not the number one choice for news in the Middle East.” To which I respond, it’s not whether we are the first choice but whether we are a choice at all. And we are – as our audience research shows. If Arabs watch other channels and then tune to us, we still advance our mission. And we should remember, Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya expressly cater to an overwhelmingly anti-American audience.

Other critics allege that, “yes, you have decent audience numbers, but you have failed ‘to move the needle’” – in effect, to reduce that very anti-Americanism. Once again, we need perspective. Congress asks us to provide objective and accurate news and information and to explain U.S. policy, believing that even if audiences do not like the policies or us, if they at least understand us, then we will have done our job. And that’s what we do, day in and day out.

In a perfect world, there would be no need for Alhurra in the countries we serve because they would have a free press and media that served the cause of advancing a positive, modern vision for democracy, peace, and prosperity in the region. But indigenous media in the Middle East, regardless of their popularity, are not now uniformly and consistently serving these purposes. Alhurra and Sawa do.

Before Alhurra and Sawa, U.S. international broadcasting had a weekly Middle East audience of approximately two million people. Today, Alhurra alone reaches over 20 million and the two stations together have an unduplicated weekly audience of over 37 million. As I said at the start, prior to Alhurra and Sawa, the U.S. had no effective voice in the region. Clearly, today we do.

I would like to thank the entire Board of Governors for their unwavering support of this program and for giving me the chance to be part of this important project for my adopted country.